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诗

Poetry

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To situate contemporary Chinese poetry among the afterlives of Maoist China is problematic, above all due to the very nature of the poetry, which is like a karst river surfacing erratically at unpredictable points and moments, making it difficult to locate its springs and tributaries. Added to this is the complication that the main novelty in the field of Chinese poetry is the wave of excellent poems written by migrant workers. Such a sociological phenomenon reopens a crucial political problem of modern China: what has been, and what could be, the role of the workers in a project of collective emancipation beyond capitalism? The permanence of a simulacrum of the ‘working class,’ mummified in the insignia of power (see Russo’s essay in the present volume), clashes with the lyrical realism of these new worker poets, who are fully aware of the radical political inexistence of workers in China today. A close source of inspiration is certainly the Misty poetry that emerged at the end of the 1970s, which brought to light the deadly ambiguities of the role played by poetry and art in revolutionary culture (see Dai’s essay in the present volume). Another hidden source, and perhaps the most paradoxical, is that Mao himself was one of the great poets of the twentieth century, although he wrote in classical regulated verses.

Finally, one could say that the richest source of the contemporary appearance of this karst river is still the immense Chinese poetic tradition, whose most authentic voices were driven by a sense of profound introspection about the place of poetry in China’s cultural space. In fact, the best Chinese poets and writers have always illuminated key dilemmas of ‘China’s identity.’ In the last 40 years, poetry has shed a peculiar light—a ‘glitter among the interstices,’¹ as Xiao Kaiyu, one of the most important Chinese contemporary poets, put it—on the very meaning, past, present, and future of ‘China.’ For Chinese writers and poets, ‘China is a big question mark’ and a vast unexplored territory accessible to poetic exploration.²

In the words of Meng Lang, a poet who recently passed away: ‘The poet stays in the blind places of history.’³ These places are perfectly inhabited by the new migrant poets. Despite the rhetoric of twentieth-century state communism, which praised the worker as the brightest historical figure, today the worker toils away in the dark shadow of history. The intersection of artistic creation and wage slavery in the new wave of migrant worker poets must resist its own obscurity and bring to light the conditions of life at the bottom of the global capitalist production chain.

This path of poetic investigation was opened by an artistic group labelled the ‘Misty Poets’ (*menglong shiren*), which was first formed in 1978–80 by the editors of the underground journal *Today* (*jintian*).⁴ This generation of young poets had grown up during the Cultural Revolution, which had given them a chance to taste a sense of equality (see Thornton’s essay in the present volume). In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, however, the political language of Maoism had become anaemic and impoverished, emptied of its revolutionary intensity and emancipatory promise. Following Mao’s death, the poets began to sense the risk of their own creative experimental enthusiasm being annihilated. In response, they dedicated themselves to a bold exploration of hidden possibilities within the Chinese language, creating new openings for thought, which reverberated across the entire Chinese intellectual horizon, not only in poetry and novels, but also in cinema, visual arts, architecture, music, and much more.

Misty Poets and the migrant worker poets are two distinct poetic configurations that, although born three decades apart, are engaging in a significant dialogue. The main ground of convergence is the concept of poetry as an independent intellectual space distant from the dominant culture and governmental discourse. Moreover, both groups share a peculiar sensitivity towards labour. Most of the early Misty Poets had experiences as ordinary labourers, as ‘educated youth’ (*zhishi qingnian*) sent to work in the countryside, or as workers in factories during the Cultural Revolution. Famous poets such as Bei Dao and Shu Ting were factory workers, Mang Ke worked in a fishing village, and Yang Lian was in the countryside—experiences through which they find resonance with migrant poets.

Living the Changing Chinese Workplace

Through these biographical experiences of contemporary Chinese poets one can glimpse the epoch-making changes of factory life in China after 1949. Chinese industrial workplaces have witnessed at least three eras: the early period of socialist construction in the 1950s; the intermediate, experimental period of the 1960s and 1970s; and the post-Maoist period with its neoliberal factories.

The poems written by workers during the era of socialist construction expressed a positive attitude and optimistic participation in the socialist project, as in ‘Factory Morning,’ a poem written by Li Xue’ao in 1957:

The valiant chimney is like the mast of a ship,
it rises high at the centre of the factory.
The towering plant is the ship cabin,
the Party secretary here is our red pilot,

when all around all still sleeps quietly,
 we sound the siren and set sail
 bringing millions of heroic hearts we enter one wider day.⁵

These were poems that glorified labour (see also Ban Wang's essay in the present volume). However, the meaning, practice, and organisation of labour all radically changed during the Cultural Revolution. The Misty Poets who lived during this intermediate period witnessed and participated in a variety of experiments, such as attempts to mitigate the division of labour; remould the relationships between workers, technicians, and managers; and produce 'theory' through the existence of 'worker theoretical groups' active in the factories, as well as 'worker universities.'

These experiments in emancipation from factory despotism and the unprecedented space for intellectual pursuits among the workers contributed to the overall atmosphere in Chinese factories during the Cultural Revolution. Yu Jian captures this multifaceted situation in a recent reflection on his decennial experience as a worker before becoming a professor of literature and one of the greatest contemporary poets:

In my factory there were figures of the past who had been labelled rightists, ex-movie actors, painters, dancers, a variety of owners of the old society, descendants of capitalists, and intellectuals. These were highly educated people, a sort of living textbook, and they became my teachers. I remember well the time in the plant, the funniest thing was the storytelling—many people told stories and putting them together seemed like novels in which they all spoke. In that factory there were frequent power outages, so we had plenty of time to tell stories. Now when I think about it, the factory was like a secret art school I remember that in the factory I had time to write poetry, sing, play the flute, there was painting, writing of ancient poetry, studying philosophy of science, we listened to the *Voice of America* ... even Western literary works from the eighteenth and nineteenth century circulated in private. I even read Shi Zhi's poems, the brochures by Robespierre, and also Herzen and Chekhov.⁶

From this point of view, certain factory spaces in the Cultural Revolution functioned as 'communist heterotopias' in which traditional factory logic and temporality were suspended, and new capacities, relations, and senses of the world could take place.

For today's migrant poets, the subjective condition of life in the factory is radically different from both the classic socialist era and the experimental interval of the Cultural Revolution. The collective 'us' has blotted into 'a massively single number' (*pangda de danshu*), to borrow a line from the poet Guo Jinniu.⁷ It is a poetic description of the radical absence of sociality, the boundless eradication of identity and belonging in which the only relationship with the 'motherland' is 'my payment for the temporary residence permit.' As Guo writes with bitter sarcasm:

A person crosses a province, another province, another province
 A person takes a train, then a truck, and then a black bus again
 Next stop

The motherland has given me a temporary residence permit.
The motherland accepted my payment for the temporary residence permit.

...

Sister Li of the north, stands alone facing south in untidy pajamas
Sister Li of the north, embraces a broken chrysanthemum
Sister Li of the north, hangs from a banyan tree
Lightly. As if her flesh and bones did not weigh.
Alas, I could not arrive to help her.⁸

Strangers to Themselves

'Sister Li of the North, hangs from a banyan tree' and the author is devastated for arriving too late to help her. Strange destiny for a poet to arrive in the place where someone has just killed oneself! In another poem, 'Going Home on Paper' (*zhishang huanxiang*), Guo portrays himself as a worker charged with putting up the nets on the top floor of the factory (this was a well-known measure taken by Foxconn managers to prevent the reoccurrence of suicides among young workers). For the poet it is an excruciating job that cannot but remind him of those who have jumped. The poem is like a funeral that brings the young boy back home, though only 'on paper.'

1.

The boy, at dawn, counts from the first to the thirteenth floor
ends up counting and arrived on the top floor
he
flies, oh, flies
he cannot imitate the birds' movements
...

3.

Thirteenth floor, I'm putting the anti-jump nets, this is my job
to earn a payday
with force turn clockwise, tighten the screws bit by bit,
fight and resist in the darkness
the more I use force, the more dangerous it is⁹

The poet searches in verse for a way to survive and resist the self-destructiveness of wage slavery.

Another migrant poet, Xing Huangtian, points out that 'we do not know anything' about workers today and their depressing labour in the deadly repetition of the factory life.¹⁰ How far from the Chinese Dream is the verse 'Dreams decreasing, slowness increasing?'¹¹ In a poem simply titled 'He,' the worker is unidentifiable, not only

outside the factory, where ‘he’ is virtually invisible, but even inside the factory. ‘He’ is the stranger—even to himself—who works at the next machine. Everyone is locked in their own obsessions:

It is always like this, day after day, month after month
 year after year, time going by,
 machinery wearing out, physical strength running out
 dreams decreasing, slowness increasing.
 It is always like this, always
 feeling blue, except for labour,
 except for love. It is like innate that
 we do not know anything about him
 we do not know what
 this person is grounded on, neither
 his obsession, but is this the obsession
 that we do not have.¹²

Fatalism

What it means to be a worker in the modern world constitutes an intellectual enigma, which requires renewed conceptual inquiry. Previous theoretical-political attempts—Marxism above all—to explain the worker as a political subjectivity and not merely an economic reality have fallen into a period of confusion and disorientation. It is unclear what a worker’s existence can be grounded in beyond mere survival.

In this era, when political visions of labour have become rarefied, the poetry of migrant workers can be read as a symptom of unmoored subjective existence. Surely, they are a ‘massively single number,’ but can this number become a collective entity? My tentative answer is to consider the ‘us’ of the ‘worker’ in these poems as animated, at least temporarily, by a ‘rational fatalism,’¹³ condensed in the following lines by Xu Lizhi: ‘I cannot accuse, I cannot complain/I can only suffer my exhaustion.’¹⁴ Though this statement is written in the first person, I suggest that it should be read as an ‘us’ representing any worker.

As young Marx wrote: ‘To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.’¹⁵ This lucid understanding of the conditions of wage labour generates an intense realistic lyricism. This lyrical power of unflinching insight can be felt in the portrayal of the radical social inexistence of migrant workers in the following two poems by Ji Zhishui—a remarkable woman poet.¹⁶ While migrants generally come from rural areas to work in the cities, they neither reflect peasant characteristics nor fit into the urban ‘Chinese dream.’ They are merely ‘rocks piling up by the side of the road;’ leaves of grass that, on encountering a gust of wind, are ‘stripped of a rippling smile/stripped of the most basic respect;’ and finally, ‘leaves falling down into the dust.’

Rocks by the Road

A gust of wind
 blows us up from the land
 and down onto machines in a strange place, down onto the assembly line
 plunged into noise, machine oil, red and black gum, white lead, rust
 beaten, screwed tight, nailed up
 our quick spinning
 flings off our accents and shouts and warm tears
 until we can't squeeze out another droplet of sweat
 and we harden into rocks
 left by the side of the road
 even if we go home we don't know how to farm
 these rocks piling up by the side of the road
 lean against one another, cold against cold

Migrant Workers

These grasses often
 encounter a kind of wind
 like a basin of cold water being sprinkled out
 stripped of a vibrating heartbeat, stripped of a rippling smile
 stripped of the most basic respect
 we head down
 like leaves falling down into the dust
 looking for food in the dirt, in garbage piles
 these people still want to run, still want to escape
 but that only brings them into the trap
 others rush onto the knife's point
 these grasses are often
 thin and weak

The last five verses expose the internal weakness of 'rational fatalism.' While insight is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of subjective existence, it is not enough to prevent self-destruction. The same movement 'to run' and 'to escape' ultimately leads to a trap, and even pushes some of the 'grass leaves' to 'rush onto the knife's point.'

To consistently maintain the 'line' of not hoping for anything and not complaining about anything is extremely difficult—a titanic endeavour requiring an ascetic-heroic attitude, which constantly risks transforming into its opposite. Under these constraints, as soon as one gives in to the poetic urge to lament one's own sufferings, one risks succumbing to the 'hope' of recognition from the society which they ostensibly reject. Since every desire for recognition involves the frustration of misrecognition, this ambivalence ends up annihilating the starting point of not hoping and not complaining.

The Tragedy of Xu Lizhi

In 2014, Xu Lizhi, a 24-year-old migrant worker at one of the Foxconn factories in Shenzhen, committed suicide, leaving behind a vast poetic body posthumously published by his worker friends. Any suicide is always an enigma that cannot be reduced to a single cause, even less, I would argue, to an act of resistance. Even his biographic details cannot explain his tragic decision, as they are no sadder than those of the other migrants. Regardless of the reasons for his suicide, we should consider his verses independently from his tragic fate. An example is 'I Swallowed an Iron Moon', which has become the emblem of Chinese migrant workers poetry.

I swallowed an iron moon
they called it a screw

I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms
bent over the machines, our youth died young

I swallowed the hurry and the displacement
I swallowed bridges for pedestrians and this rusty life

I cannot swallow any more
everything that I swallowed flows back to my mouth

I spread across my motherland
a poem of shame¹⁷

Other verses by Xu Lizhi offer chilling descriptions of the condition of workers in the despotic atmosphere of the factory:

I Fell Asleep Standing like That

The sheet of paper in front of the eyes yellows slightly
I use the pen to mark over with various shades of black
it is full of a worker's vocabulary
workshop, assembly line, platform machine, work sheet, overtime, wage ...
by these words I was trained to be submissive

I cannot scream, I cannot resist
I cannot accuse, I cannot complain
I can only suffer my exhaustion in silence
when I first arrived here

I was only hoping for the grey pay check of the tenth of the month
that gives me a late consolation
for this I have to grind off the edges and corners, grinding the language
never skipped work, never a day of illness, never a day of personal break

never arrived late, never left early
 I'm standing like iron next to the assembly line, my hands as if they were
 flying
 how many days and how many nights
 I fell asleep standing like that.¹⁸

Such intense verses leave us with much to meditate on. The existence of poems written by migrant workers affirms the infinity of poetry against the oppression of any finitude. Clearly the way out of the hell in which these poems were written is still to be invented, but it will depend on the possible affirmation of creative subjectivities. How can this migrant proletariat of the contemporary world unite to abolish wage slavery? We can glimpse at least one sign of trespassing towards a new political capacity. Mi Jiuping, a worker from Shenzhen Jasic Technology, a factory in the southern metropolis, was arrested in July 2018 for spearheading a protest in which he and his colleagues demanded, among other things, the establishment of an independent workplace union. At the time of writing, he still remains under detention, but this poem, which he wrote while in jail, has been shared across several blogs and websites, becoming famous among the workers and generating its own collective force:

I am with us

I stand atop a hill,
 Seeing beyond the highest heavens,
 The mountains crisp green,
 The red sun rising.
 I stand on the banks of a great river,
 taking in the sight of the water,
 the rolling waves
 surging on endlessly.
 I am a crane in a crowd of people,
 I am silent beyond the outskirts,
 I have lost family, love, and friendship,
 I have lost all,
 I have lost everything.

I will have family, love, friendship,
 I will have all,
 I will have everything.
 Not today,
 But in the not-distant future,
 I am not me,
 I am with us.¹⁹

Xiao Kaiyu observed, with a touch of skeptical irony, that for Mao poetry would be resurrected only when everyone in China became poets. Is not the new wave of migrant workers poets a 'Maoist' signal?²⁰

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